

Review by Paul A. Kramer, Vanderbilt University

---

Andrew Zimmerman's *Alabama in Africa* is a truly remarkable achievement, one of the most powerful and illuminating works to emerge so far in the effort to recast historical thinking beyond national scales. At its core, it is an inter-imperial history of German colonialists' attempt to transplant New South cotton varieties and labor regimes to Togo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but Zimmerman embeds this project in rich, wide-ranging, multilayered intellectual, social and political contexts, weaving this story into an account of the violent conjunctures of racial ideology and globalizing capitalism and the historical roots of modern social knowledge. Elegantly wrought, subtly argued and carefully researched, it is a model of global history writing that provides one of the most convincing histories available of the forging of racialized power in the modern world. As Zimmerman demonstrates, the racial commonplace that German and New South ideologues constructed in dialogue—that Africans and their descendants in the New World possessed both an exceptional capacity for agricultural labor and an exceptional absence of self-disciplining morality—authorized exceptional exercises of state power on both sides of the Atlantic, while leaving an imprint on the conceptual vocabulary that scholars of society—including historians—bring to their work.

The book, which reconstructs linkages between actors, discourses and institutions in motion between Germany, the U. S. South and Togo, can be usefully seen as undertaking three tasks that are both distinct and seamlessly interlaced. Fundamentally it is a transfer history: the story of German colonialists' efforts to reproduce the New South's cotton regime—a regime they understood simultaneously as racial, material, and political—in their African colonies with the aid of a Tuskegee Institute not lacking in imperial ambition. More broadly, it is the history of the contrapuntal relationship between racial ideology and labor coercion in an era of globalizing capital. As Zimmerman shows, the Tuskegee cotton experiment in Togo was both enabled by and in turn provided raw material for contentious debates about race, labor and migration: about how modern states and corporate powers could successfully mold labor forces that were free but subordinated, mobile but captive. Finally, it engages the history of social thought itself, as an account of key figures—especially Karl Marx, Max Weber, W. E. B. Du Bois and Robert Park—whose theories were both foundational for many twentieth-century historians and social scientists and forged in precisely the contests over labor and freedom that Zimmerman places at the center of his inquiry.

Three particular strengths of the book are worth highlighting. First, it represents a triumph of historical scaling. It would not be inappropriate to call it a work of transnational history for its refusal to conform to national-territorial charts, but the term would also reduce its intricate cartographies. Better to think of it as an innovative exercise in inter-imperial history, a tracking of the borrowing and translation of techniques of control, production and order-building between imperial formations. Importantly, Zimmerman's imperial systems are not coterminous with nation-states: his German colonialists and social scientists focus not on the United States as a whole, but on a specific set of strategies at the core of what can be seen as the United States' *imperium in imperio*—

the brutal system of Southern labor coercion, underwritten by essentializing hierarchies, that secured agricultural commodity production and regional and national industrialization. Rather than framing his story in terms of nations—even interconnected nations—Zimmerman lets the idiosyncratic channels dug by his actors structure his account, tracing their travels, collaborations, networks, imaginaries and citations. He has been peripatetic in his research, carrying out archival research in Germany, the United States, Tanzania and Slovenia, and the work has a remarkably deep focal length, seeming to lose little sharpness as it shifts between German, U. S. and Togolese settings. Notably—and agreeably—absent is a sense of inherent connection between this broadened historiographic scale and emancipatory (or even cosmopolitan) politics as such, a puzzling but surprisingly common feature of the charters and prefaces of transnational historiography during its first self-conscious decade. Alongside other recent and emerging works, Zimmerman’s book reveals the ways that the “transnational” was a space that belonged not only to migrants, subalterns and liberationists, but to traffickers in hierarchy and subordination.

Second among the book’s chief accomplishments is the subtlety and power of its account of race-making. While many historians detach racial imaginaries from the specific material and institutional contexts that shape them and are shaped by them (often exaggerating their temporal and geographic portability in the process), Zimmerman insists on grounding the German-Togolese-American politics of racial difference in a distinct historical situation, specifically, the problem of labor discipline in a capitalist world that enabled, required and was simultaneously troubled by the fact of formally emancipated and mobile workers. As he shows, racial knowledge moved along global routes carved out by the aspiration to translate exceptional politico-legal status and exceptional exploitation into each other, whether this project unfolded in settings of formal colonial rule (as in Togo), apartheid citizenship (as in the United States), or migratory subordination (as in Eastern Germany). In this way, “the Negro” emerged simultaneously—and inseparably—as a set of essentialized understandings of the character, capacities and limitations of Africans and African-descended peoples, and an array of coercive technologies intended to channel their labor towards the dependent production of agricultural commodities (here, cotton) for the global market. This contrapuntal analysis of the interplay between essentialized and laboring bodies in the imaginaries of German colonialists, Jim Crow ideologues and connected German and American social scientists makes *Alabama in Africa* indispensable reading for historians of racialized power working at local, sub-national and national scales, as well as imperial and global ones.

Third, the book re-historicizes key figures in modern socio-political and historical thought in compelling ways. As Zimmerman shows, Max Weber, Karl Marx, W. E. B. Du Bois and Robert Park were deeply immersed in transatlantic dialogues over the meanings of race, labor, and state in the post-emancipation era, and their thought—which generated many of the twentieth century’s core paradigms of social knowledge—cannot be understood apart from the conditions of its origins. Weber appears here as an anxious racial nationalist preoccupied with the degenerating influence of the German East’s migratory Polish workers, the *Sachse* many in the book will compare to African-American sharecroppers and who, Weber feared, would bring proletarianization, class conflict and

revolution in their wake. Marx, to the contrary, emerges as a fierce partisan of free labor beyond capitalism, who sees in African-American emancipation a decisive turn in the global struggle for workers' freedom. Du Bois reports on New South agriculture before the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* as a student, eagerly adopting its approach to instrumental expertise and social reform, while remaining wary of its racial enthusiasms. It is arguably Robert Park whose trajectory most densely crisscrosses Zimmerman's linked worlds of the German East, the American South and colonial Africa, as a student of agricultural sociology in Germany, a publicist for Tuskegee-style industrial education as the alternative to King Leopold's vicious rule in the Congo, and founder (along with William I. Thomas, a scholar of Polish *Sachse*) of the Chicago school of sociology. Readers get to eavesdrop on some amazing moments that, while perhaps well-known to biographers and specialists, take on new meaning when placed on Zimmerman's epic canvas: Max Weber's minstrel-style imitation of black speech during a visit to distant relatives in Mount Airy, North Carolina stands out here. By building these actors into his story, Zimmerman provides deep and understated insight into the need to situate our very categories in the historical moments that gave rise to them, and points to the challenge of reconstructing the past with the conceptual tools inherited from it. Zimmerman's way through this dilemma involves historicizing social categories themselves, while pushing beyond their limits: while clearly drawn to materialist analysis, for example, he distances himself from Marx's sense of race as epiphenomenon. In situating the book's own analysis, one might say that it represents a conversation between the radicalizing, race-conscious Du Bois of the early twentieth century and the liberatory Civil War-era Marx (a different version of which, of course, occurred within Du Bois' own thought following his Marxian turn.)

A book of such vast and largely achieved ambitions necessarily has some limitations. On several occasions, Zimmerman corrects his historical actors for what he identifies as logical and/or moral consistencies in their thinking in a way that comes across as ahistorical, implicitly positing as it does a true rationality outside of history against which these logics can be gauged, and foregrounding inconsistency itself as an ethical lapse. The evidence for one of the book's strongest causal claims—that Tuskegee's imperial turn promoted its conservative pedagogical shift in the early twentieth century—is relatively thin, ultimately hinging on a chronological correlation. The claim itself is also given undue rhetorical emphasis: a book that covers as extensive ground as this one would lose none of its power if it turned out that forces other than collaboration with German colonialists directed Tuskegee away from whatever insurgent potential it may have once possessed.

One of the principle risks of a materialized approach to race, such as Zimmerman's, is functionalism, whether strategic (race as a convenient divide-and-rule instrument of capital) or ideological (race as the always-available means for naturalizing capitalist social hierarchies.) In his admirable effort to fasten racial and material histories, Zimmerman can sometimes approximate functionalisms of these kinds. On occasion, the articulation between German and American cotton regimes and "Negro" ideology can seem too tidy (did German colonialists really not refer to Togolese as "Negroes" prior to the Tuskegee cotton experiment (14), for example?) and Zimmerman's firm connection of racial difference to labor control raises the question of why the race/labor complex he studies survived (in

mutated form, at least) far beyond the historical eras of both sharecropping and colonialism.

Finally, there is the question of the core transfer narrative. Throughout the book, Zimmerman refers to the race/labor formation under study as a “New South” entity, encapsulated in the “Alabama in Africa” title, and he provides plentiful evidence that post-emancipation American debates on the ‘Negro problem’ were central to German understanding of colonial governance and exploitation in Togo. But in such a thickly-connected historical universe, why privilege a transatlantic, New South axis over an intra-European, *Sachse* one (even understanding, as Zimmerman vividly shows, that these imaginaries were themselves co-produced)? If Togolese people were imagined by German colonialists in terms of both “the Negro” and the Polish migrant worker, why is this ultimately the story of “Alabama in Africa”? Here the challenge is one of talking about relative depths, degrees and kinds of discursive-political influence in ways that are both sophisticated and synoptic. Still, the book’s title in some ways betrays the complexities of the terrain the work actually maps.

As a way to both signpost and aerate its dense analysis, the book might have also engaged in a more explicit discussion of the historical dynamics of transfer itself. Zimmerman has achieved a model history of multidirectional discursive and institutional transmission, but he provides little methodological guidance, leaving readers to ponder (and ponder we should) how he pulled it off. Such a guide might have enlisted the well-developed field of transfer history to explore the interacting forces that promote, shape and constrain the movement of ideas, practices and institutions between societies: the intellectual contact zones where perception of sameness can be assembled; the trans-societal lingua franca through which potential interlocutors can discover and recognize each other; the tissues of constructed commonalities with the capacity to render unlike phenomena similar or even identical; and the hard wires of transport, communication and production that render some mobilities possible and profitable, while pre-empting, compromising or defeating others, for example. These inquiries all animate and enable the book, but only tacitly; a more direct address might have eased the way for scholars inspired to adopt Zimmerman’s mode of connective historiography.

At first glance, the sugar beet on the dust jacket of *Alabama in Africa* seems an odd choice. But upon further reflection, it condenses remarkably well (as would a cotton boll) Zimmerman’s themes and methods: as a global commodity, as the offspring of agrarian science and, most of all, as the toil of uprooted workers shut off from other productive possibilities. It may also speak to Zimmerman’s insistence on bringing large-scale structures and histories—of capital’s global enclosures, of race’s iron cages—to ‘ground.’ In its nesting of local, imperial and world-wide scales, its nuanced account of the entanglements of labor discipline and essentializing thought, and much else, Zimmerman has provided an urgent, necessary and exemplary history of a divided, integrated global condition.